



November 19, 2012

John Fitch – A Pictorial Remembrance

By Art Evans

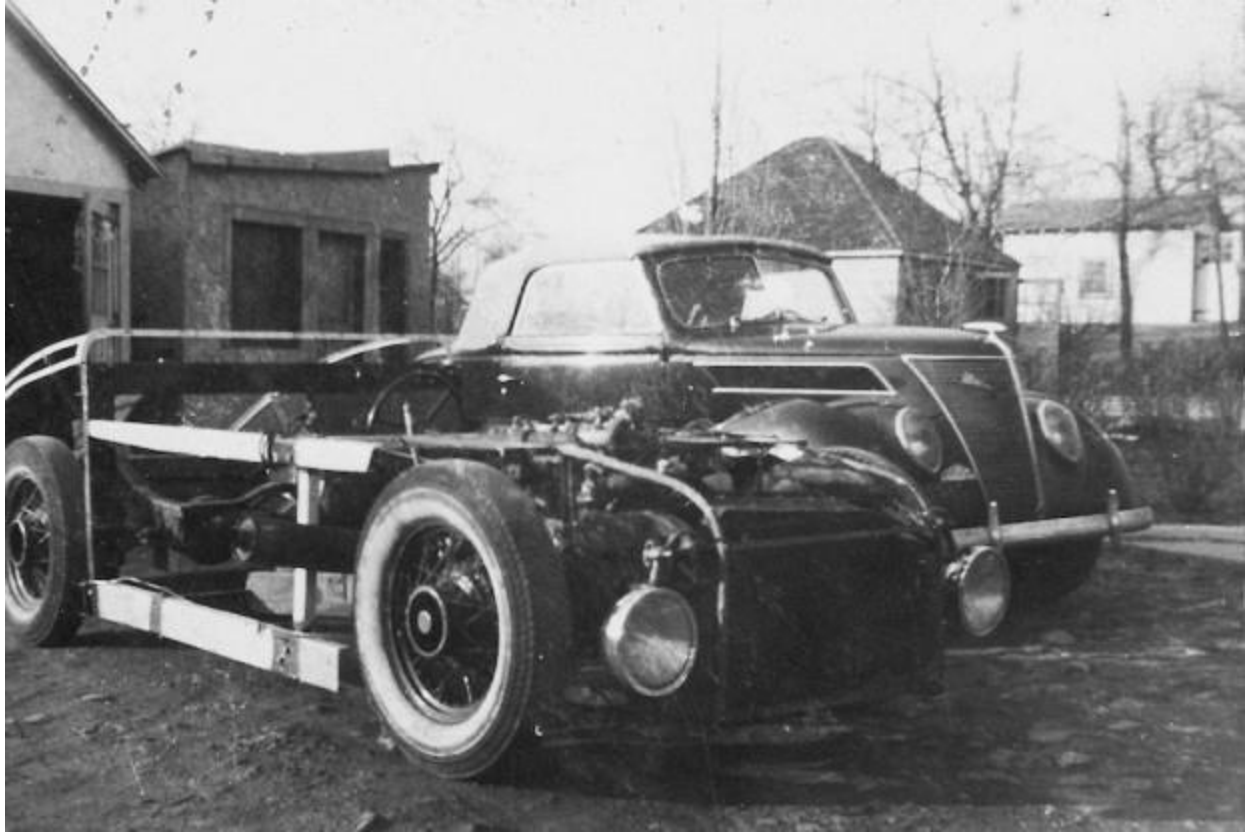
John Fitch & I were close friends for more than 50 years. We played together, sailed together, traveled together, partied together & wrote books together: *"Racing Corvettes, The Early Years"* & *"Racing with Mercedes"*. Altho on opposite coasts, we always kept in touch via email & telephone.

This remembrance consists of more than 90 images selected from various sources, including the GM Archive courtesy of Bob Lutz, the Daimler-Benz Archive, John's own collection, as well as mine. Special thanks to Don Klein, Larry Berman, Bob Sirna & Carl Goodwin.

John lived a truly extraordinary life, a virtually incredible one. I have tried to impart a small taste w/these images. This is in no way a history. A complete pictorial would probably have 1,000 rather than 90. At any rate, such a complete history would be impossible because a sufficient # of images do not exist.



John Cooper Fitch was born in Indianapolis (IN) on 8/4/1917.



As a teenager, John was engrossed w/cars & their construction. His 1st was cobbled together from various different parts.



After studying civil engineering at Lehigh University for a year, he dropped out in 1939, hopped a freighter for England & toured the British Isles in an MG.



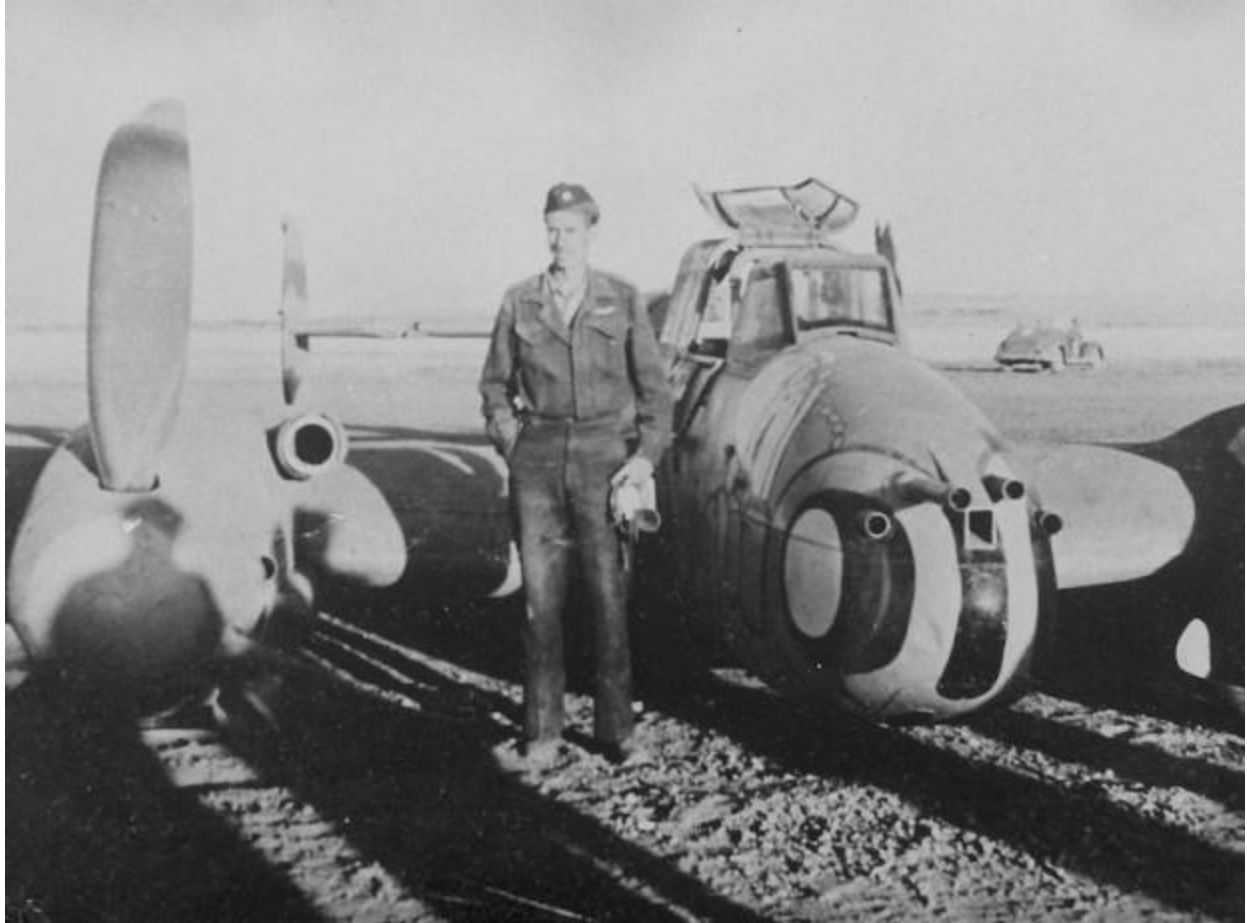
With war looming, he returned to the U.S. & spent \$1,500 for a 32' schooner, the 'Banshee', & sailed the Gulf. His girlfriend was his 1st mate. They were part of a civilian Coast Guard patrol to report German submarine sightings. They never saw a sub.



Fitch joined the Army Air Corps early on 4/29/1941 & earned his wings.



John's unit, the 15th Bombardment Squadron was the 1st Americans in Europe. He participated in the 1st U.S. bombing raid over occupied France on 7/4/1942. He flew more than 50 bombing missions.



Posted to North Africa, John flew a captured Messerschmitt ME110 to help train Americans. He was shot down & had to crash land in 1944, but survived w/out injury.



Switched from bombers to fighters, John was shot down in his P-51 in February 1945. He bailed out, sent to a German prison camp & liberated by General Patton in May & rotated home.



*John went to Florida & bought a pontoon plane & operated a shuttle service. He met Kathleen Kennedy** & she became his girlfriend. Kathleen took this photo of her mother, Rose, & John while on a fishing trip. John became friends w/Kathleen's brother, John Fitzgerald.*

**Kathleen Agnes "Kick" Cavendish, Marchioness of Hartington (2/20/1920 – 5/13/1948), born Kathleen Agnes Kennedy, was the 4th child & 2nd daughter of [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.](#) & [Rose Kennedy](#). She was a sister of future [U.S. President John F. Kennedy](#) & widow of the [heir apparent](#) to the [Dukedom of Devonshire](#). When President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) appointed Joseph Kennedy ambassador to the [UK](#), his daughter Kathleen (nicknamed "Kick" by her family) spent a year & a half living in [London](#). She was educated in London at [Queen's College](#). Kathleen later worked at [Cissy Patterson's](#) newspaper, the [Washington Times-Herald](#) in 1940, writing a column titled, "Did you happen to see ...?".^[3] In 1943, she returned to England to work in a center for servicemen set up by the [Red Cross](#). Despite the opposition of her [Catholic](#) mother, she married [William Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington](#), an [Anglican](#) & the eldest son & heir apparent of the [10th Duke of Devonshire](#), on 5/6/1944. Her eldest brother [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.](#) was the only member of the Kennedy family to attend the ceremony. Four months after their marriage, her husband was KIA while serving in [WW II](#). Her husband's younger

brother [Lord Andrew Cavendish](#), married to [Deborah Mitford](#) of the famous [Mitford sisters](#), thus became the heir apparent to the dukedom. Popular on the London social circuit & admired by many for her high spirits, Kathleen eventually became romantically involved w/[Peter Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 8th Earl Fitzwilliam](#). The couple planned to wed after Lord Fitzwilliam's divorce; however, while on a trip to the south of France, both were killed as the result of an airplane crash in [Saint-Bauzile, Ardèche, France](#). Only Kathleen's father represented the family at her funeral. Her mother did not attend &, allegedly, discouraged her daughter's siblings from attending as well. Kathleen is buried in the Cavendish family plot at Saint Peter's Church in [Edensor, England](#), near [Chatsworth](#) in [Derbyshire](#). The gymnasium at [Manhattanville College](#) is named in her honor. Her brother [John F. Kennedy](#) visited the grave shortly before his own death in 1963.



Kathleen was killed in a plane accident in 1948, so John moved to NY where he operated an MG shop in a Willys dealership in White Plains (NY).



Bitten by the racing bug, John entered his MG TC in a race at Bridgehampton (NY) on 6/11/1949. He came in 5th OA.



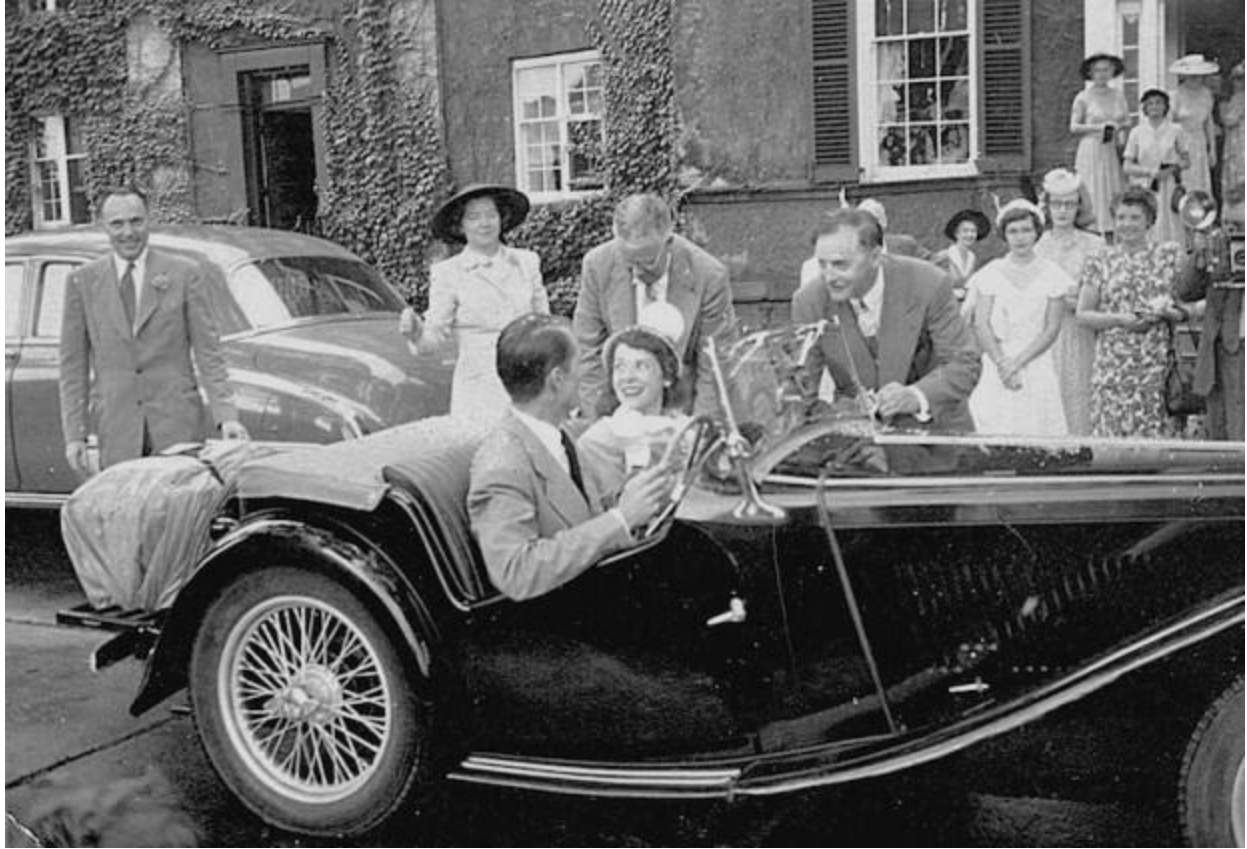
John's new girlfriend, Elizabeth Huntley, was also his pit crew. Fitch finished 4th OA & 3^d in class at Linden on 8/21/1949. After the race, John asked her to marry him.



John Fitch marries Elizabeth Huntley.



The wedding was followed by a gala party.



The pair honeymooned in the MG TC thru Maine, Vermont & New Hampshire.



Afterwards, they went to Watkins Glen (NY) where John entered the Seneca Cup & finished 6th OA & 2nd in Class.



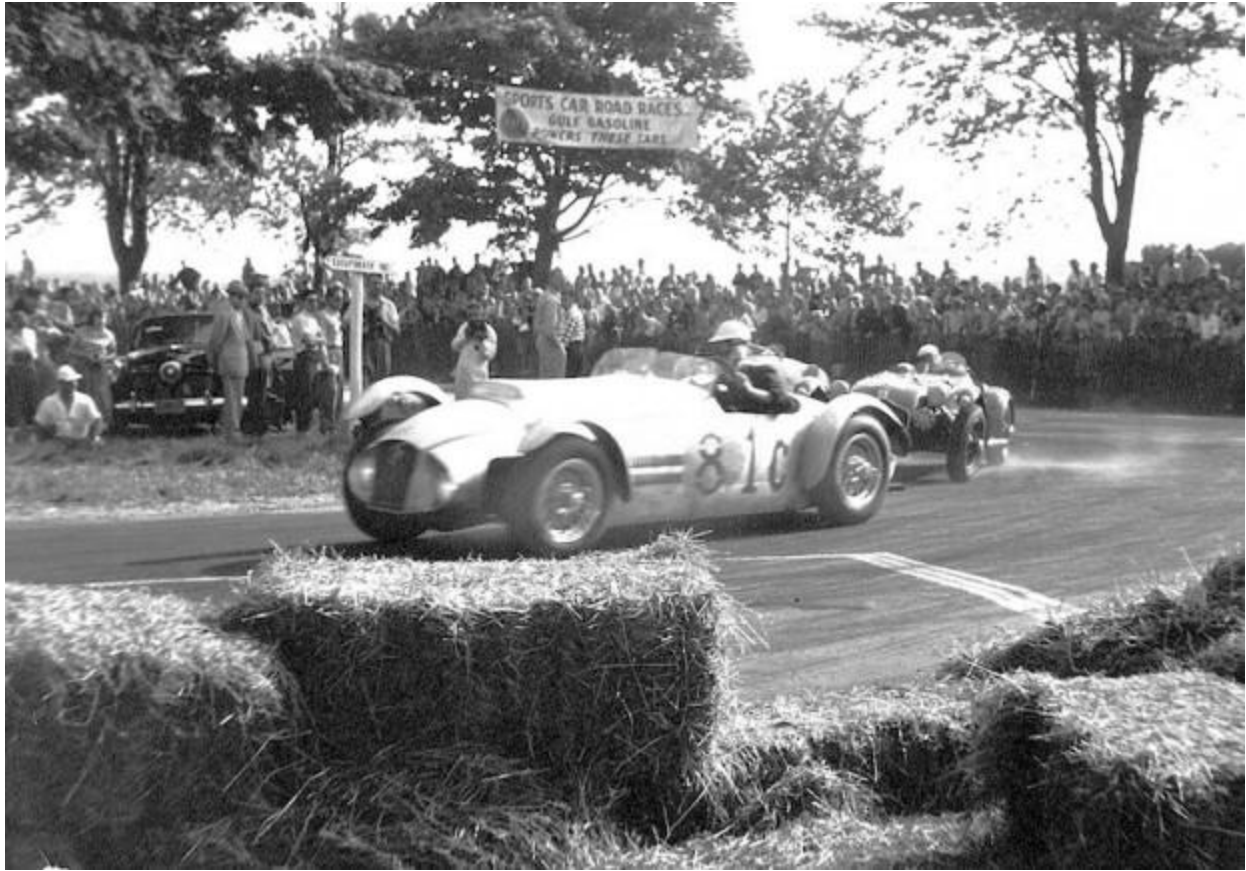
In 1950, John created the Fitch Model B, a Ford V8-60 engine in a Fiat 1100 chassis w/a modified Crosley body. On 5/7, he took a 2nd in its 1st race & a 3rd at the Bridge a month later. Called the "Fitch Bitch," he sold it to Paul O'Shea at the end of 1950.



On 12/31/1950, he entered a Jaguar XK120 at Sebring (FL), the 1st American Sports Car Endurance race. He & co-driver, Colby Whitmore, covered the 6 hours & finished 16th OA & 1st in Class.



On 3/11/1951, Argentine dictator Juan Peron hosted a sports car race in Buenos Aires. John borrowed a Cadillac-Allard J2X from his friend, Tom Cole. Fitch ended up finishing 1st OA. It's traditional for the race winner to receive a kiss from the race queen. In this case, she was also the queen of the country, Evita Peron.



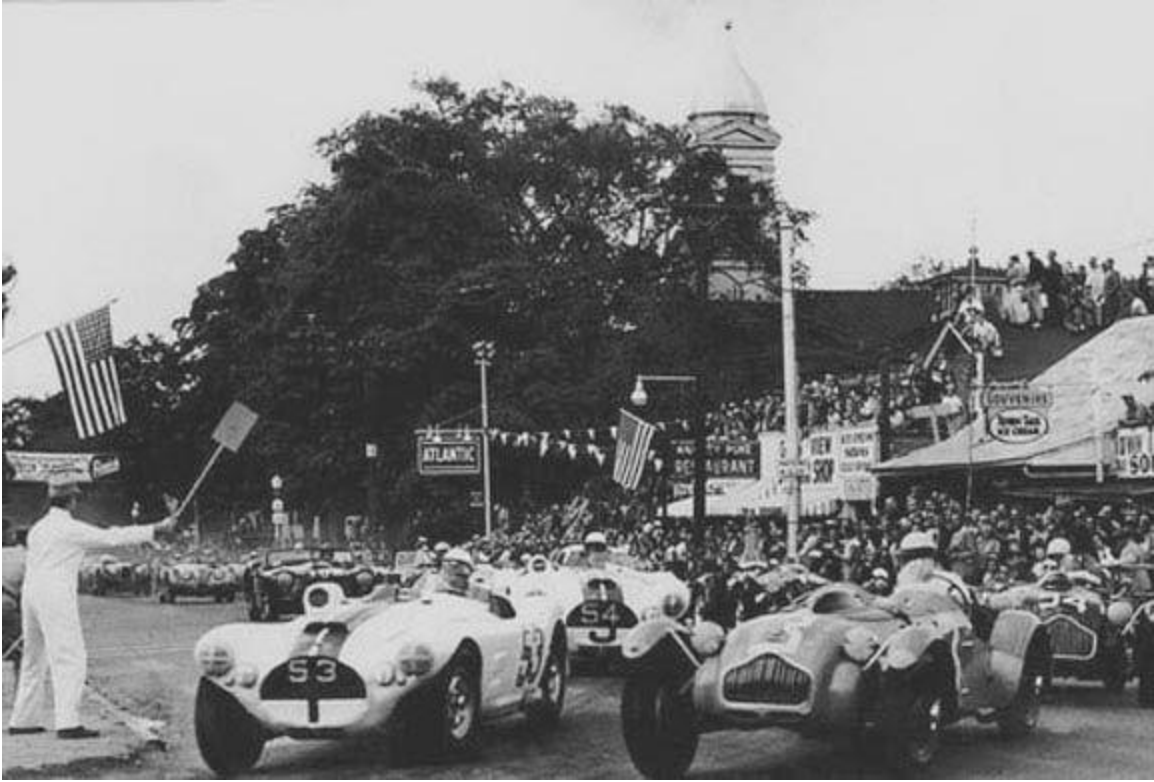
Back home, John built another sports-car special, the famous Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar in which he won many SCCA races. The car is so viable that it has been raced almost continually since its construction, now in vintage events.



In 1951, John started racing for Briggs Cunningham. His 1st time out was at Le Mans on 6/23 in a Cunningham C2. He & co-driver, Phil Walters, were 18th OA & 1st in Class.



On 8/26/1951 at Elkhart Lake, John won the main event.



*The next month at the Watkins Glen G/P on 9/15, he came in 2nd
04.*



Briggs had John & co-driver, George Rice, run a new Cunningham C4R at the 1952 Le Mans. After running in 3rd for the 1st 4 hours, their engine failed & they were DNF.



In August 1952, John was invited to try out for the Mercedes-Benz team.



Team Director Alfred Neubauer was pleased w/John's performance at the Nurburgring.



The Porsche factory team was there for a Porsche-only race so, due to his performance for Neubauer, John was asked to drive a 356 Porsche. He finished 4th OA among some of the best German drivers.



On 9/20/1952, John returned to Watkins Glen to drive a C-Type Jaguar in the Seneca Cup for importer Max Hoffman. He won it. In addition, John became the 1st SCCA National Champion.



Because of his tryout earlier in the year & because he had lobbied hard to convince Neubauer to enter, Fitch was invited to join Mercedes-Benz in its assault on the Carrera Panamericana, the Mexican Road Race.



One of the most difficult & demanding races in the World, the route covered 1,932 miles from the bottom of Mexico at Tuxtla Gutierrez to the top at Ciudad Juarez. John, the driver, was teamed w/his mechanic-navigator, Eugene Geiger, in 1 of the 3 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL W 194 factory race cars.



Alfred Neubauer congratulated John for finishing in 4th place, but was later disqualified for stopping off the road for a repair. The new 300 SLs were 1st w/Karl Kling & 2nd w/Hermann Lang. Luigi Chinetti was 3^d in a Ferrari 340 Mexico Berlinetta.



Carrera Panamericana, 1952 – From the left: racing manager Alfred Neubauer, Eugen Geiger & John Fitch, w/the Mexican ponchos of the winning team Hans Klenk & Karl Kling; in 2nd place: Hermann Lang & Erwin Grupp.



After running a Sunbeam-Talbot at the Monte Carlo Rally in Europe, John returned to the U.S. & won an 8-hour race at MacDill AFB in Tampa (FL). Elizabeth helped him celebrate.



Then it was back to Sebring on 3/8/1953. This time the event was extended to 12 hours. John drove a Cunningham C4R for Briggs & won OA.



Cunningham entered John & Phil Walters again at Le Mans. John set the fastest lap at 154.8 mph. He & Phil finished 3rd OA in the C4R.



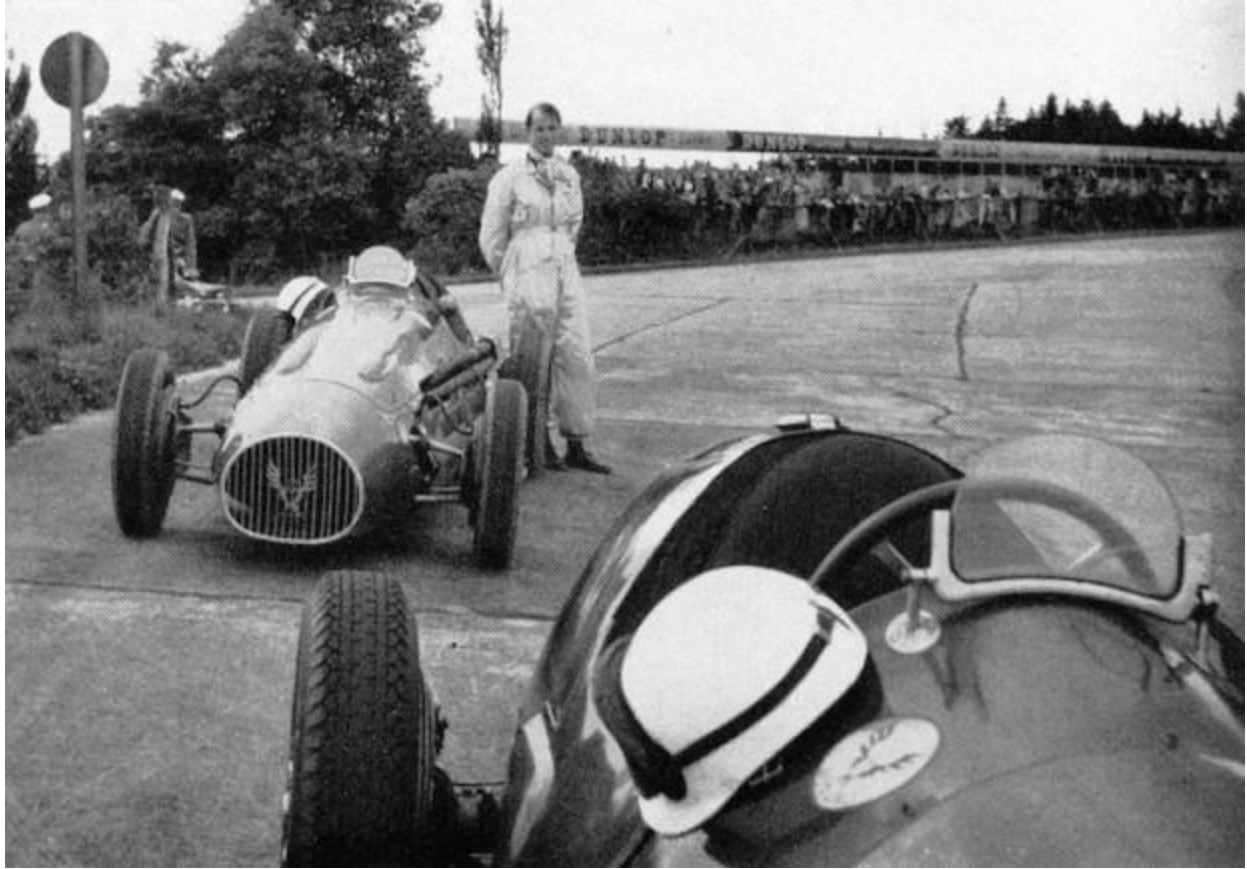
Phil Walters, Briggs Cunningham & John Fitch at Le Mans.



Fitch stayed on in Europe to run a Sunbeam-Talbot in the Alpine Rally for the factory. He & navigator Peter Miller were 20th OA & 8th in Class.



John's final race for 1953 was at March AFB near Riverside in SoCal. He was 1st OA in Brigg's Cunningham C4R, clinching his 2nd SCCA National Championship. He was congratulated by a # of Hollywood glitterati. I was there shooting w/my trusty Rolleiflex & met John for the 1st time.



Fitch only entered 5 events in 1954. His best finish was a 3rd at Tampa in Brigg's 2.9 Ferrari. John's main activity that year was helping make the movie, "Racers".



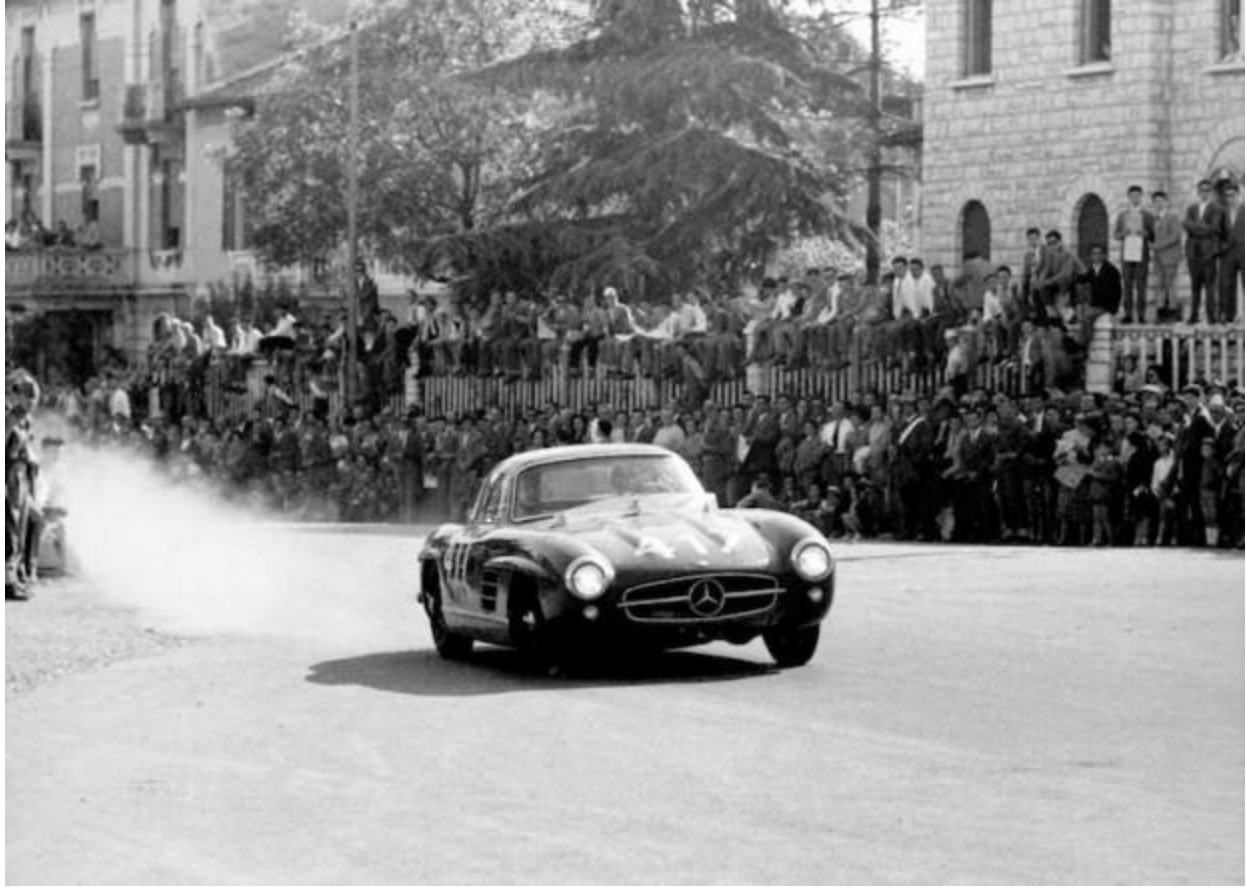
John helped the actors act like race car drivers & eventually did some stunts.



Perhaps the best year for John was 1955. He became a member of the Mercedes-Benz team & the only American ever to drive for them. The 1st event was the Mille Miglia in Italy. John waited w/the production 300 SL for tech inspection.



John's navigator was German journalist Kurt Gesell.



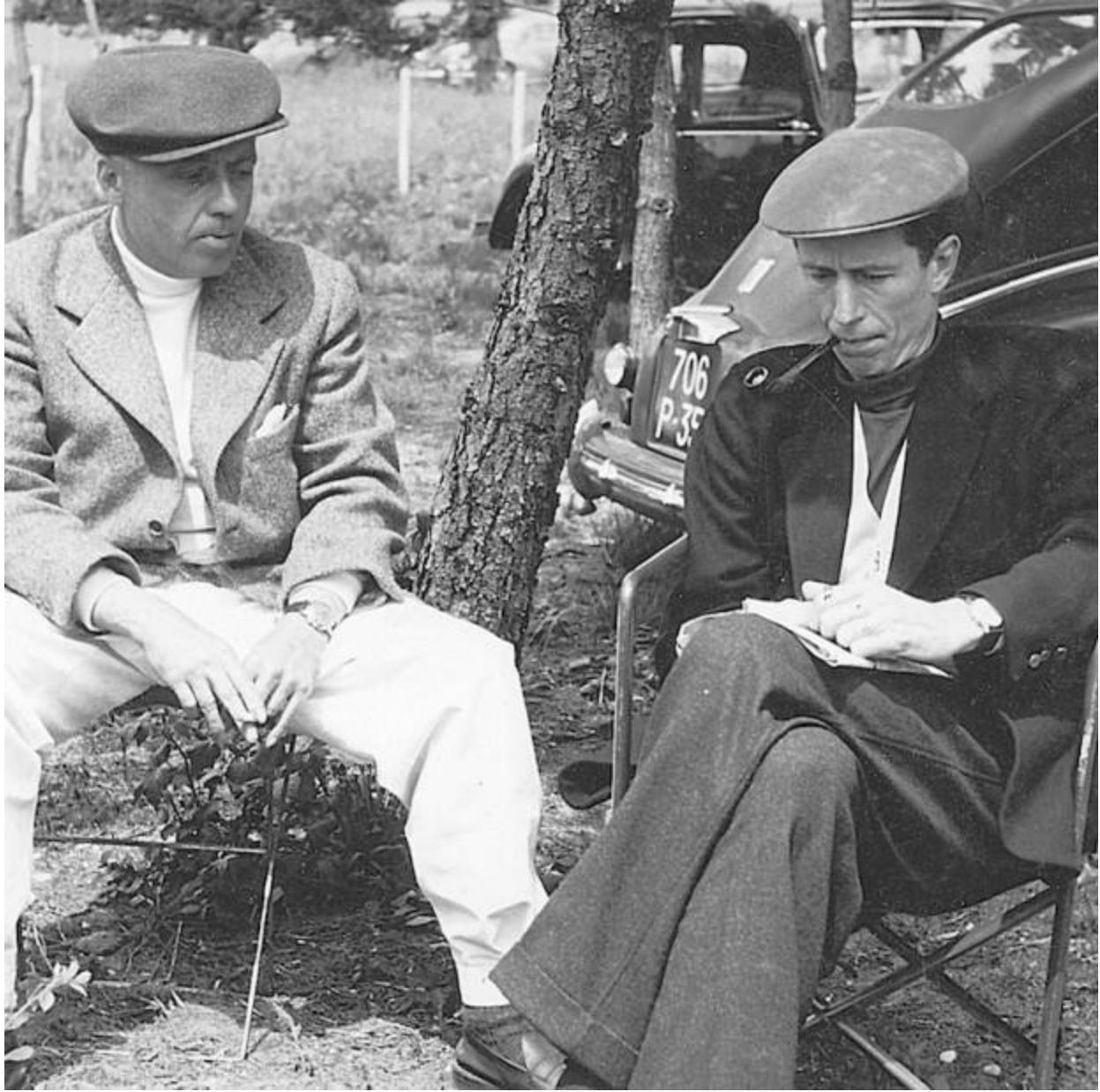
*John Fitch & Kurt Gesell in the production Mercedes-Benz 300 SL
Gullwing at the 1955 Mille Miglia.*



John has told me that was the most significant race for him. He won the Gran Turismo (G/T) Class & finished 5th OA.



Stirling Moss won OA in a Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR. Chief Engineer Rudy Uhlenhaut (L) congratulates navigator Denis Jenkinson (C) & Stirling Moss.



Next it was off to Le Mans for the Mercedes-Benz team. Neubauer teamed John w/Frenchman Pierre Levegh. The 2 talked it over before the start.



Talking shop in Le Mans, 1955 – John Fitch (L), Pierre Levegh, who had a fatal accident during the race, & racing manager Alfred Neubauer.



Start of the 1955 Le Mans 24 Hours. Levegh was selected to drive the 1st leg.



After 2 hours, Levegh was still at the wheel. Lance Macklin in an Austin-Healey swerved to the center of the track to avoid Mike Hawthorne's much faster D-Type Jaguar. Levegh hit the Austin-Healey, became airborne. The 300 SLR hit an embankment, disintegrated, the magnesium alloy caught fire & the remains of the car went into the crowd. More than 80 died in what has been called the worst racing accident in history.



Next for Mercedes-Benz was the Tourist Trophy on 9/17/1955. Fitch was teamed w/Stirling Moss in a 300 SLR.



John Fitch driving the Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR – the Tourist Trophy took place in Northern Ireland over what was called the Dunrod Circuit on 7.42 miles of narrow, twisty public roads. Fitch & Moss brought Mercedes another victory in the contest for the World Manufacturers Championship.



The last race of 1955 was the Targa Florio. The Mercedes-Benz team of 300 SLRs came in full force. Mercedes & Ferrari were neck & neck for the Championship. The Targa would tell the tale.



John was teamed w/Desmond Titterington. In this photo, John leads the Ferrari 857 Sport of Eugenio Castellotti & Robert Manzon.



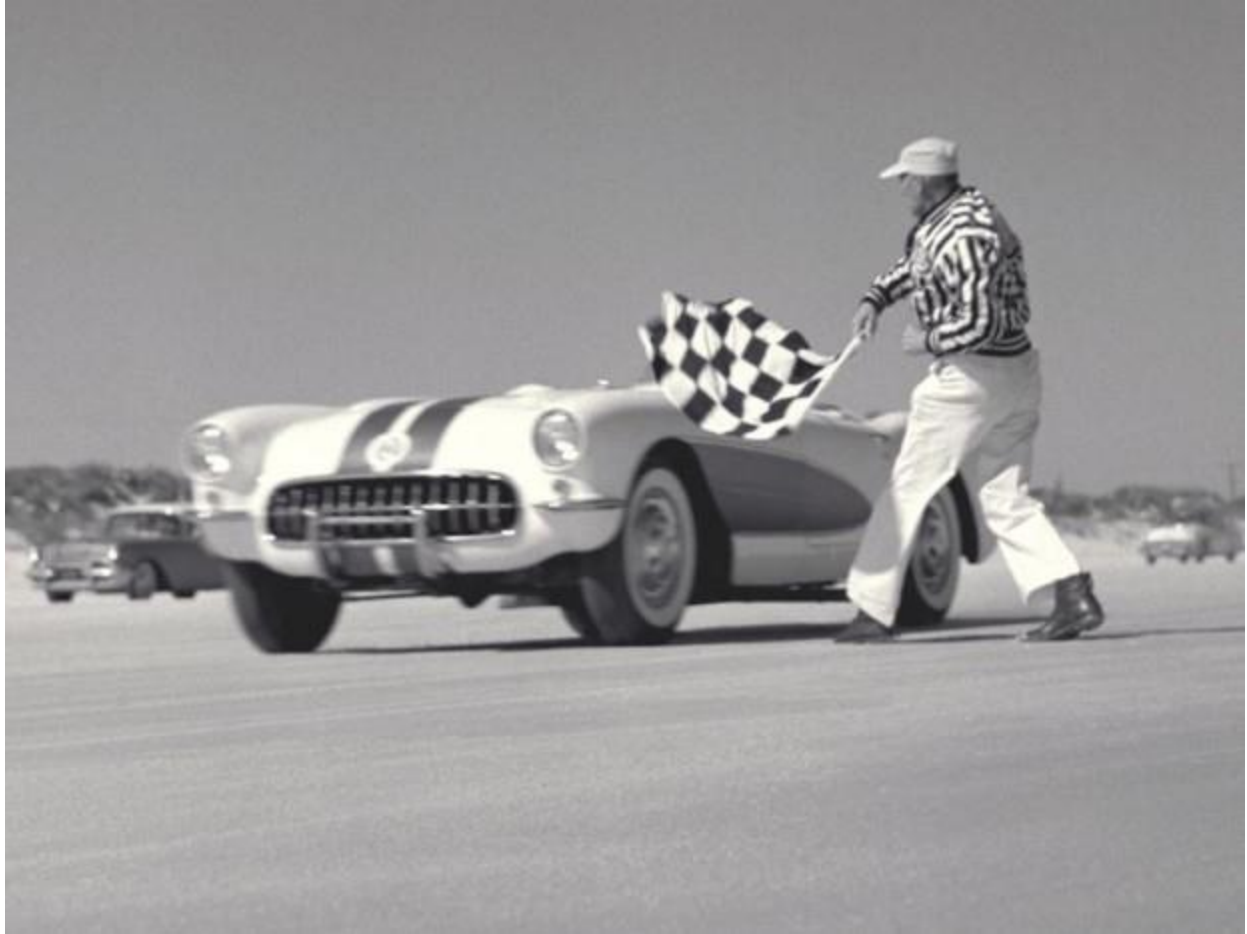
Each 44-mile lap of the Targa Florio had 710 corners. The public roads over the Island of Sicily had both domestic & wild animals wandering around as well as bandits. Surfaces ranged from bad to worse & a missed turn might mean a horrific drop down the side of a mountain.



Mercedes-Benz Team Photo – Stirling Moss & Peter Collins stormed into the lead, breaking all records & took the flag followed by Juan Manuel Fangio w/Carl Kling in another Mercedes-Benz 300 SLR. Fitch & Titterington were 4th.



After Fitch wrote Chevrolet Chief Engineer Ed Cole about Corvette's competitive possibilities, Cole had John drive a stock Corvette at Daytona Beach (FL) in February 1956.



Fitch covered the Flying Mile at 145.543 mph, setting a new production-car record.



As a result, Cole named John team manager for an effort at Sebring in March. The team was Corvette #1 w/John Fitch & Walt Hansgen, Corvette #5 w/Dale Duncan & Allan Eager, Corvette #6 w/Ray Crawford & Max Goldman, Corvette # 7 w/Ernie Ericson & Chuck Hassan.



*Before the start, the band played the Star Spangled Banner.
Everyone stood at attention.*



The Fitch / Hansgen Corvette had a larger engine & a 4-spd transmission. The finished 9th OA & won Class B.



After the Sebring 12 Hours, Crawford & Goldman were 15th & won Class C. The other 2 cars failed to finish, GM won the Team Prize. In a few short weeks, John Fitch had turned a boulevard cruiser into a competitive, world-class sports car.



For the rest of 1956, John drove for Briggs Cunningham. At Elkhart Lake on 9/9 in a 6-hour, he was 2nd OA in a D-Type Jaguar.



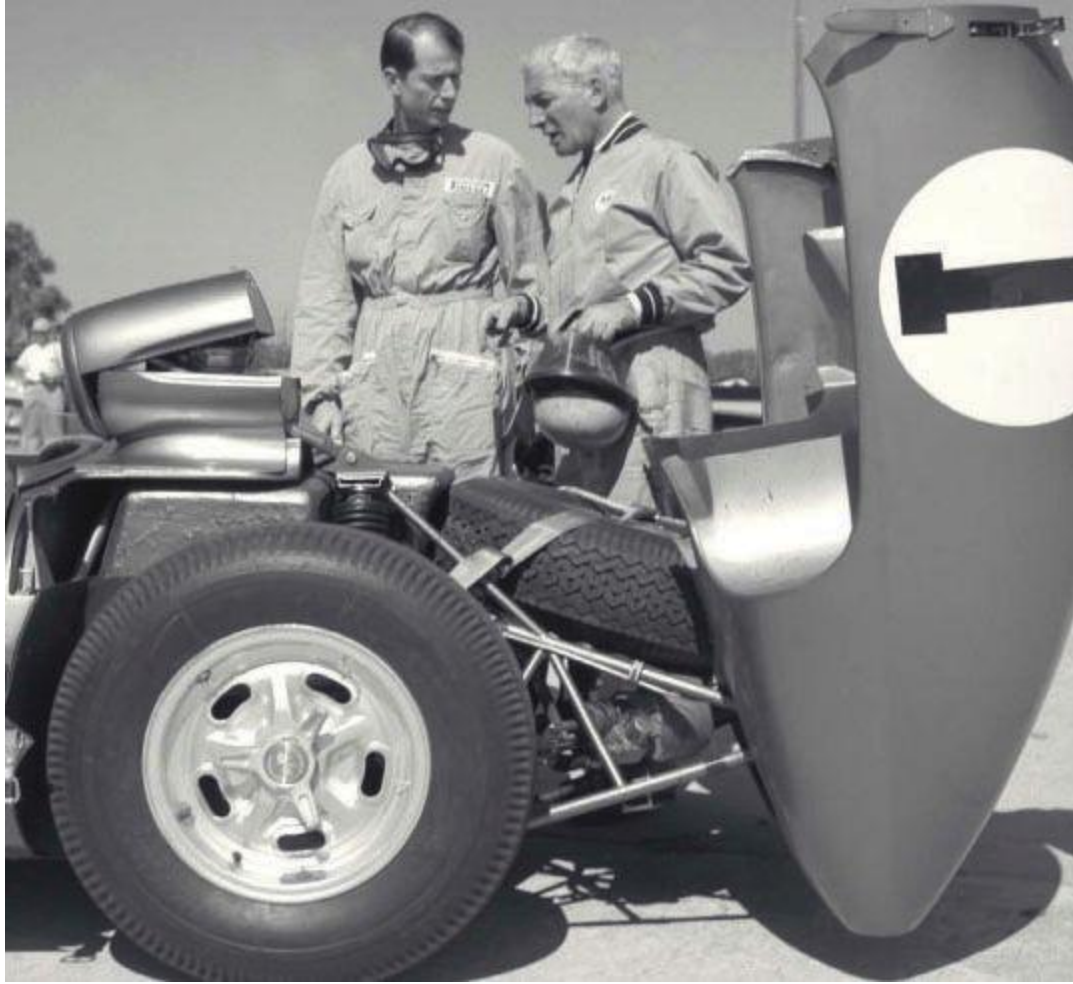
At the 1956 Nassau Speed Week in December at the wheel of Briggs' D-Type, John ran in 3 events, scoring a 1st, 2nd & 4th.



In March 1957, it was back to Sebring. Again, Fitch was asked to lead the GM team. This time, the factory sent a new Corvette SS, Detroit's 1st modern all-out sports racing car plus an SR2 & 2 production cars.



John & Piero Taruffi, Italy's 'Silver Fox' drove the SS. During practice, Fangio gave the car a try, breaking the previous year's record by 2 seconds. Then Moss went out & did only 1 second slower than Fangio.



This time, Corvette Chief Engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov was on board too. The previous year he had told Cole that there wasn't enough time to prepare the cars & declined to participate.



*At the end, the SS had failed to finish when the engine overheated.
The SR2 was 7th in class while the production cars scored a 1st & 2nd
in class.*



At Watkins Glen on 9/21/1957, John drove a 200S Maserati in the Queen Catherine Cup to 4th OA & 1st in class.



Towards the end of the decade, Fitch began to taper off racing. In 1959, he drove a Cooper-Monaco in a NASCAR Sports Car event at Harewood Acres, Canada, but, while in the lead, had to drop out on the 41st lap when a fuel line broke.



John's last European foray was at Le Mans in June 1960. Briggs Cunningham entered a 3-car Corvette team: Cars #1, #2 & #3.



Start of the 1960 24 Hours of Le Mans – Fitch was in car #3 w/Bob Grossman. Cunningham himself drove another Corvette w/Bill Kimberley in #1 w/Dick Thompson & Fred Windridge in #2 rounding out the team.



John & Bob finished 8th OA, the best a Corvette would do at Le Mans until 2001.



After GM came out w/the Corvair, John designed modifications to turn a rather prosaic car into a poor-man's Porsche called the Fitch Sprint. They were so good that Sprints could hold their heads up in SCCA events.



Due to the success of the Sprint, John designed a completely new car based on Corvair components. He called it the Phoenix. The body is stunningly beautiful. Only one Fitch Phoenix was built because when Ralph Nadar called Corvairs (unjustly) "Unsafe At Any Speed," Chevrolet dropped the line.



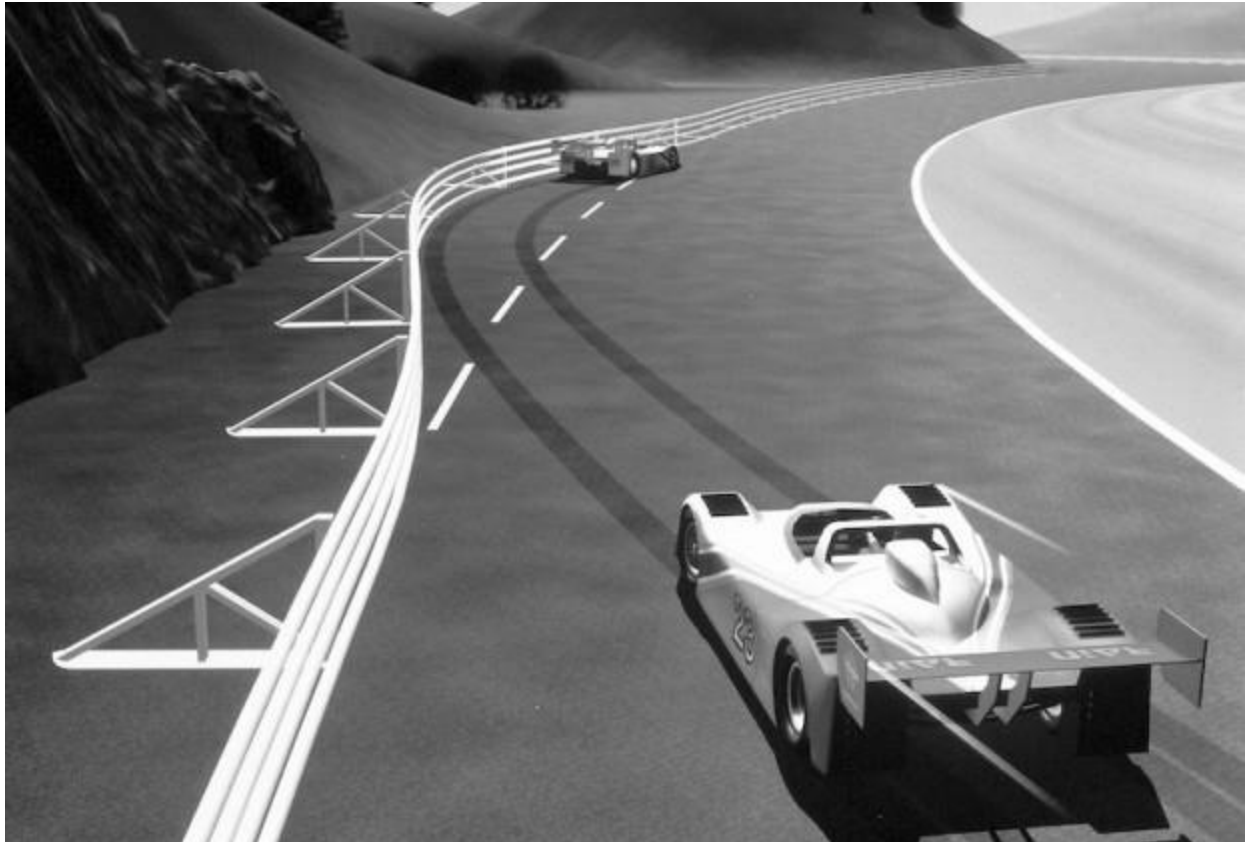
John ran his very last (other than vintage) race at Sebring in 1966. He, along w/Briggs Cunningham & Davey Jordan, drove Briggs' Porsche 904. Unfortunately, after 148 laps, the engine failed & they were DNF.



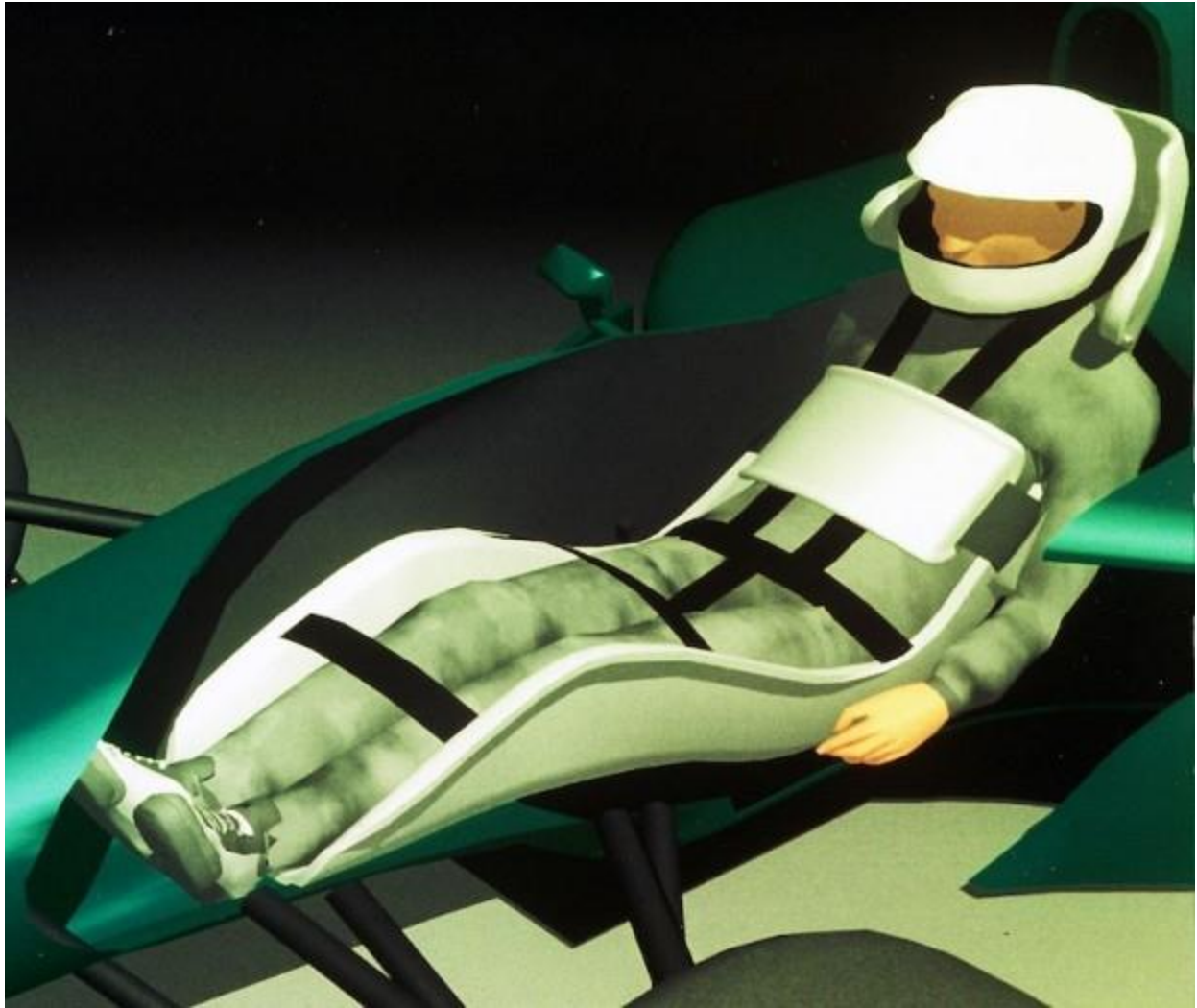
With his racing career at an end, John turned his attention to race & highway safety. He began an extensive series of experiments & came up w/partially-filled w/sand plastic barrels. His 1st demonstration took place at Lime Rock on 9/5/1967.



Today, Fitch Inertial Barriers are used on virtually every public highway. John's greatest achievement was this invention, which has, to date, saved an estimated 20,000 lives. Unfortunately for John's finances, his patent ran out long ago & many are made w/out a royalty being paid.



But the Fitch Inertial Barriers weren't John's only contribution towards safety. The steel barriers on roads are often unkind to cars & drivers when struck. So John created Fitch Compression Barriers & Fitch Displaceable Guardrails for use on race tracks.



Fitch also developed a much safer seating & harness arrangement for race drivers.



In 2000 at the Fall Goodwood Revival, John drove a replica prototype Mercedes-Benz 300 SL W 194 to commemorate his drive at La Carrera Panamericana in 1952.



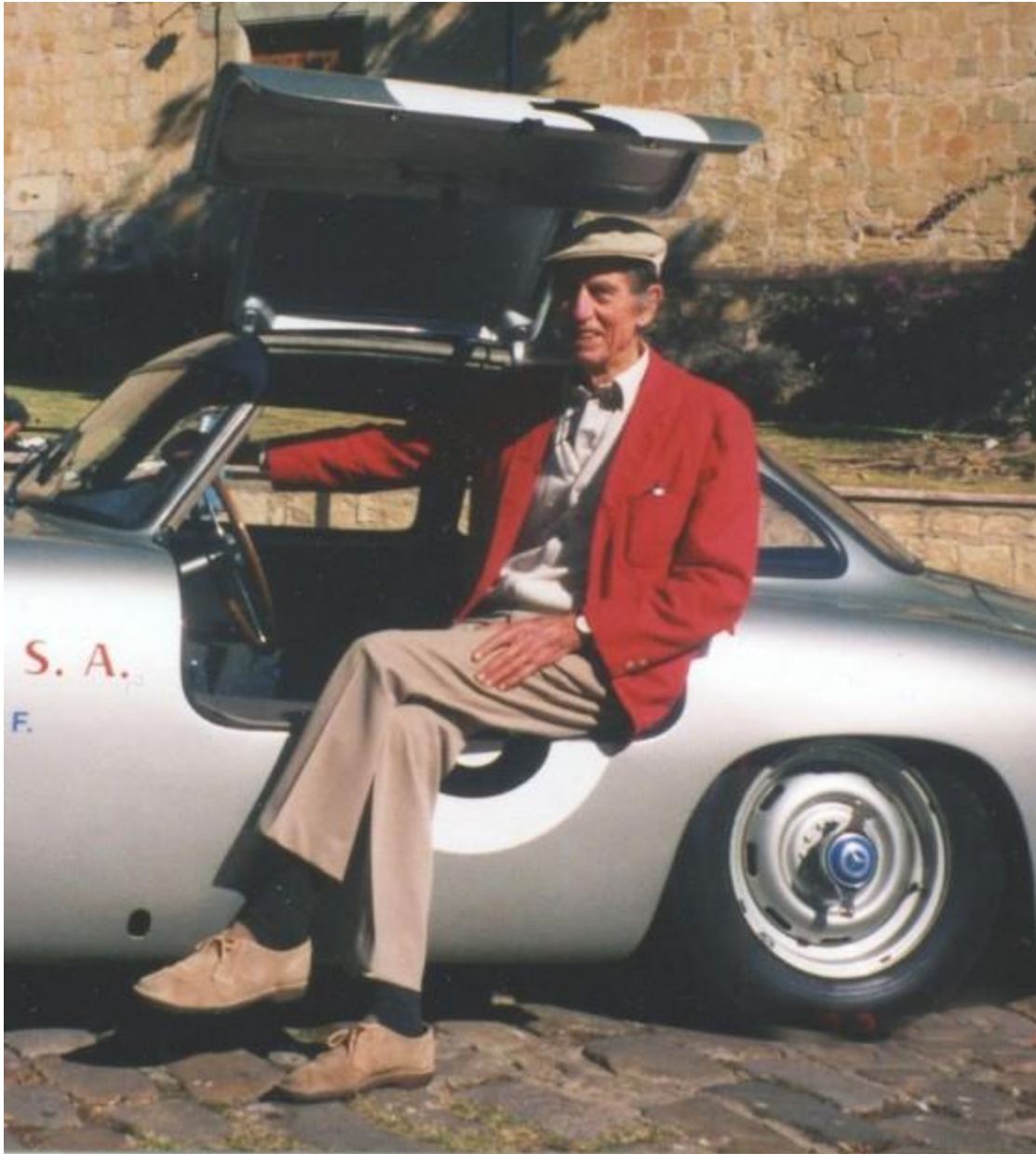
John, in the car, talks it over w/Sir Stirling Moss & Sir Jack Brabham.



Dan Gurney, Phil Walter's widow Sheila & John contribute to the celebration & remembrances at the 2001 Watkins Glen Vintage Festival.



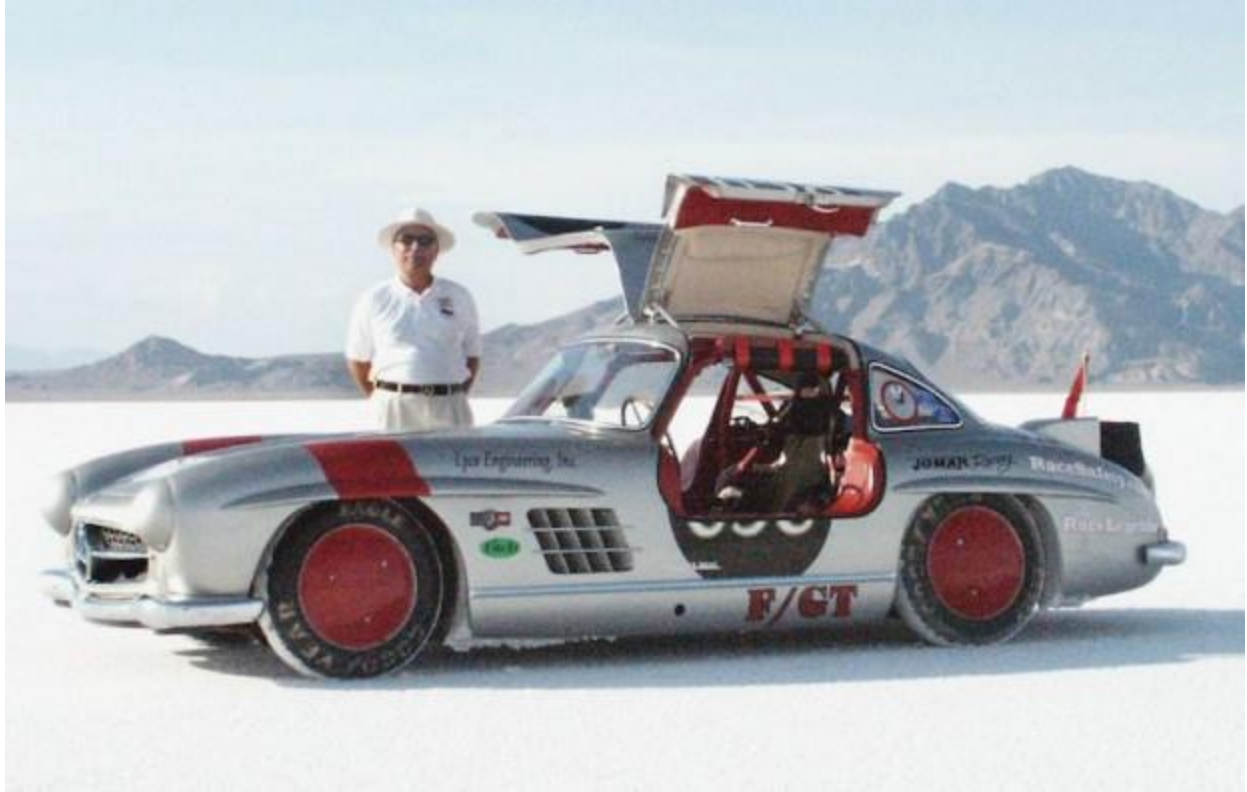
John's friend, Bob Sirna, had acquired & prepared a 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL. He entered it in the Mille Miglia retrospective in 2002 w/John driving & Bob navigating.



The Mercedes-Benz PR folks staged a reunion event to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1952 Carrera Panamericana victory. They invited John F., as I recall him telling me, paid all of his expenses as well as a rather generous honorarium.



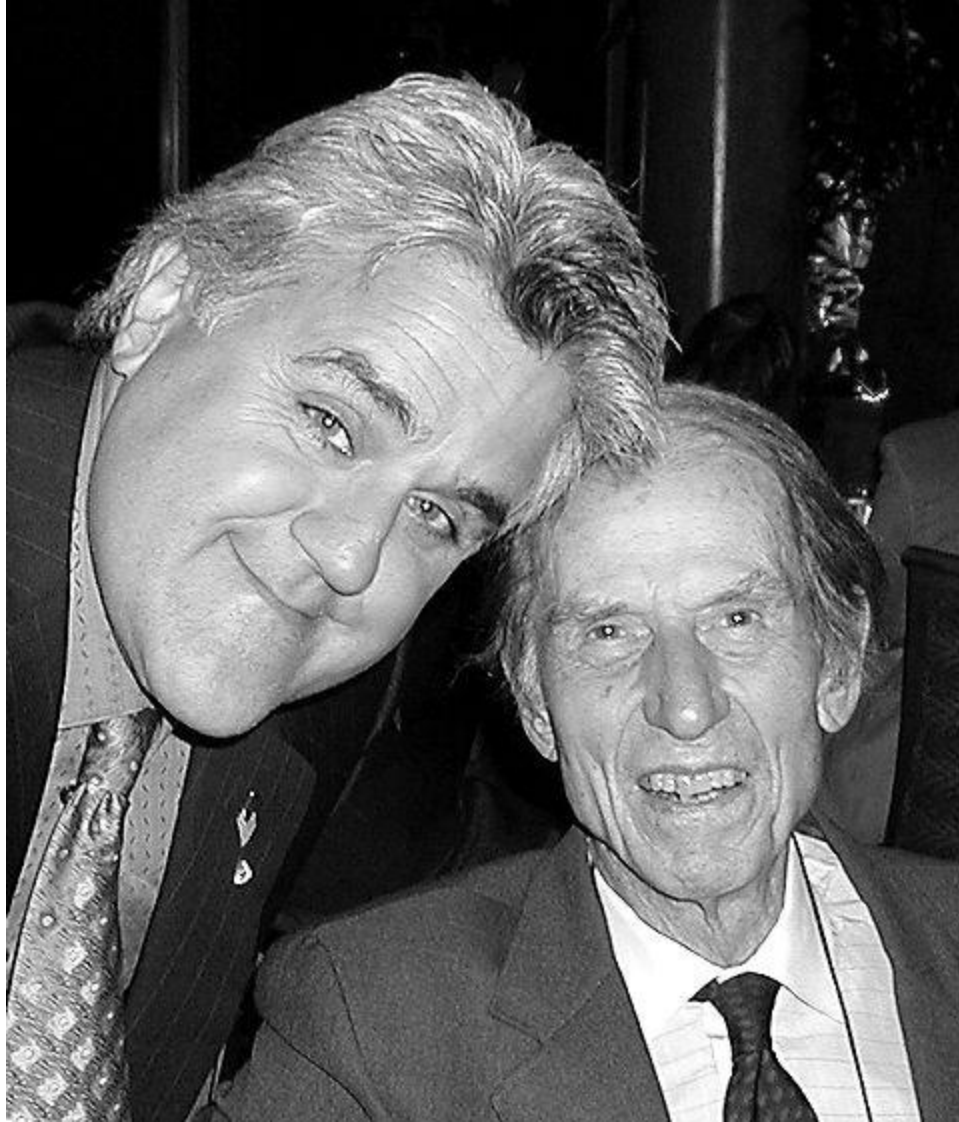
John Fitch in the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL W 194 at an event marking the Carrera Panamericana Mexico in 2002.



In 2003, Bob Sirna took his 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing to Bonneville to attempt a Class record. John drove for him. In this photo, Bob is standing behind his car.



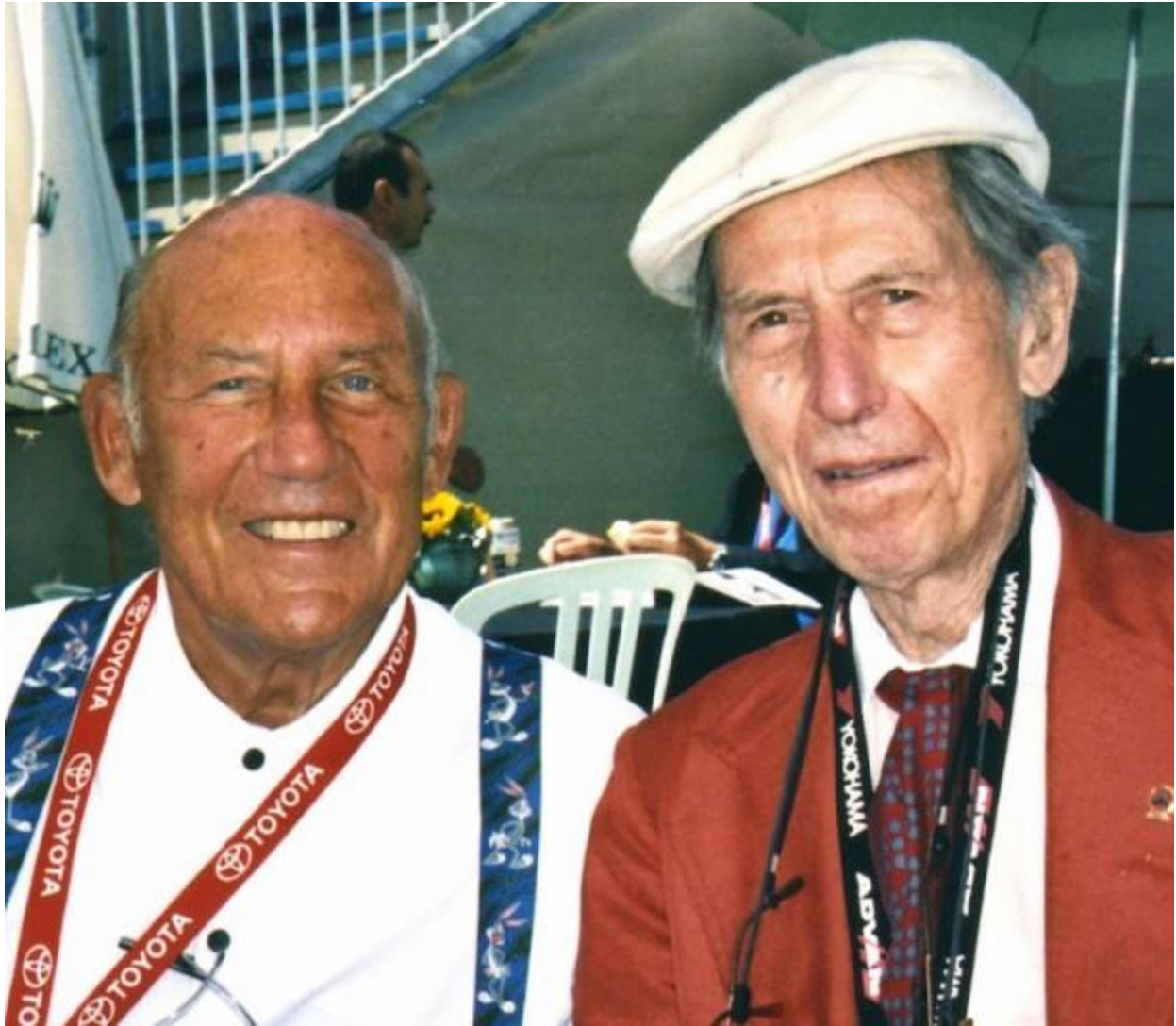
The 2003 Bonneville attempt failed, so Bob & John returned the following year & again in 2005.



*For a # of recent years, John & I would go to the Monterey
Historics together. Our friend, Jay Leno, was usually there too. So
one year, I snapped this photo.*



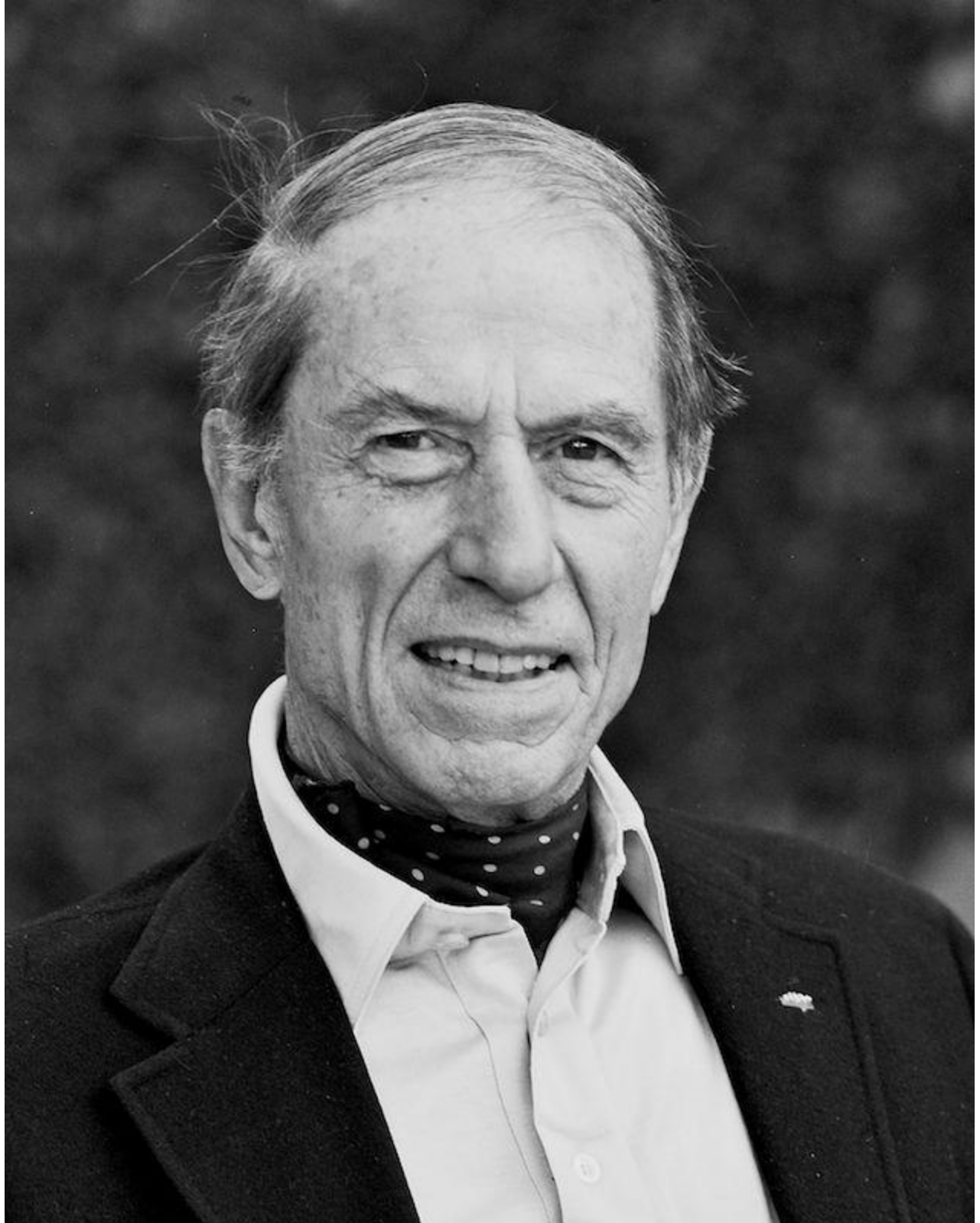
On 8/4/2007, it was my great honor to help celebrate John's 90th birthday at my home in Redondo Beach (CA). We had a large # of guests including Bob Bondurant (L), Phil Hill & Mr. Corvette, Dick Guldstrand (R).



During his last year, John was ill much of the time. One of his highlights, however, was when Stirling & Susie Moss came to visit over Labor Day.



Much of the time that last year, John was bedridden & slept a lot. One time my friend & John's confidant, Don Klein, asked him if he was unhappy. "No," John replied, "My dreams are wonderful. I have long & intimate talks w/Elizabeth." (John's wife, Elizabeth, died in 2009).



I took this portrait of John in 1992 when we had a birthday party for Briggs Cunningham. John Cooper Fitch died peacefully in his home at Lakeville (CT) at age 95 on 10/31/2012, surrounded by his 3 sons, John, Christopher (Kip) & Stephen.